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ABSTRACT

On the one hand, the social science tradition of imitating hard scientific methodology has led to a situation in which much research has little to offer the real and complex world of the practicing teacher. On the other hand, some educators measure education by the angle of students' heads and the quality of their graffiti in the washroom. Most school textbooks reinforce the idea that students should be passive and that knowledge should simply be given to them. Some presumptions and values about reading, language, and educational development also hinder effective teaching. The unreality of much educational research is reflected in the nature of the reading curriculum being offered to students. Educators' assumptions do not match the needs expressed by young people. An obsession with "good" books is a form of censorship, excluding much material that may promote literacy and differing points of view. Rather than a mechanical literacy, the future requires a literacy that promises intellectual freedom and an opening of the mind. (JL)

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READING THROUGH THE CURRICULUM.

Bruce Gillham.

I end my presidential year with profound feelings of disquiet about the attention devoted to the problems of literacy and communication in our educational institutions. I am not only concerned by the antics of those who are hostile towards us, apathetic, or simply unaware of either the problems we describe or of the solutions we suggest. I am also concerned with those who believe too well in their various prescriptions. Karl Popper in his world of tentative solutions and hypothesis falsification reflects how I feel. In this Popperian world the purveyor of certainty is also the purveyor of ignorance.

Social Science and the homunculus

The social science research tradition with its aping of hard scientific methodology has led us into a situation in which we have frequently designed and promulgated research which has little to offer the real and complex world of the practising teacher. Illuminative and case study researches have been systematically undervalued and G.H. Bantock's and Schutz's wise notion of the homunculus as a way of coming to terms with the essential interactive subjectivity of social research has been scarcely recognised. And yet it is with the homunculus that we are most concerned:

> Transfigured in a sea of frothing chemicals,
> And now museumed in a hard and ringing jar;
> Made in madness for the Reasonable Men
> To stare at, and not be amazed:
> Withered, he crouches in his jar,
> Walled in by centuries of glass frustration.
>
> ('Homunculus' Roger Harvey)

It is at least arguable that we have been led into a madness akin to pursuing tigers with a rod and line, and that we are emmeshed in a strange,

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persuasive and mystifying orthodoxy. We have become the makers of strange humunculi:

> I have been making them for years -
> it was in Leipzig I discovered how;
> not from Krumholz - who was mad -
> but from Bodraznovicz, his assistant,
> and Richardson, who was, I'm told, a
> homosexual.
>
> They showed me: it was easy - easy!
> Once I learnt to isolate the toxins
> I was in business, as Americans would say.
>
> This one is far from perfect:
> look, the head is overlarge,
> the legs are weak, the eyes.....
> well, the eyes are tired.
> It will not live beyond a month.
>
> But here, here is my success:
> wouldn't you agree?
> Look how firmly he defies you through the glass;
> there is no weakness in his eyes,
> but there is anger, and that is good.
> He won't refuse his food for long -
> he has the will to live.
>
> Believe me, I shall do it,
> I shall make the perfect Homunculus.
> It will not be long -
> I have this very day discovered something new.
>
> Through here we have the preparation rooms.....
> would you like to take your jacket off and come inside?
>
> ('The Maker of Homunculi' Roger Harvey)

Sir Keith Joseph in seeking to change the title of the Social Science Research Council reveals his own doubts on this matter. In a letter dated 14 October 1982 he suggested that he would;

> "... be grateful if the Council would consider whether its name might not more accurately reflect the range of studies and methods embraced by its work. On the latter my hope is that, recognising that this breadth of activity is always likely to require some variety of method, your Council should sympathetically consider some change of emphasis....."

The difficulty lies in deciding how much of what our 'visionary' Secretary of State sees is mirage and how much special insight.

Notions of quality and educational practice

On the other hand in some ways we seem to be in danger of entering a new dark age. A Junior Education Minister for example, recently spelled out the criteria which he claimed to use when deciding whether a school was good or bad (not better or worse, you will notice - no Popperian tentativeness here!). The Minister told a London conference that his first criterion was the amount of litter in the school yard; his second was the amount and quality of graffiti in the loos; and his third the angle at which the children held their heads as they listened to their teacher in the classroom. The last inscrutable reference to the angle of the head was explained with considerable authority. It appears that if the children's heads are at an angle of about 45 degrees then normal teaching is probably going on, but if they are further forward, the children are likely to be asleep. If heads are further back than 45 degrees, then the children are probably in revolt.

(The Northern Echo 4.2.82).

As I finish writing the forgoing paragraph I fear that a few quantifying, empirical individuals amongst the readership will already be bending their heads at 45 degrees in order that they can scribble down an interesting hypothesis for future investigation. It is the value system revealed by such pronouncements which is most disconcerting particularly as this view of education is not an uncommon one. The ideas that education consists of sitting with your head suitably inclined and listening and writing to order. Doubtless you will have noted too, that free writing (if it has to be done) will be assessed in the toilet. Interestingly, a head angled higher than 45 degrees, normally the case when one is speaking (except with Uriah Heap, perhaps), is considered to be evidence of revolt. Discussion will clearly not be tolerated. Neither does serious independent reading form a part of this notion of education. Education is to be passively received by the young from those who are older and wiser.

School textbooks and passivity

There is little scope for complacency as these ideas have penetrated deep into the reading curriculum and into the larger school curriculum of which it forms a part. Most subject area text books currently produced are the mute perpetuators of this mode of operation; they are written for a passive knowledge-deficient readership; they consolidate the dangerous perceptions that our Minister makes so deceptively comic.

If reading is as Warner defined it, a kind of 'conversation' then most subject text books constitute very one sided conversations indeed - in effect the literary equivalent of the bore at the Christmas party. In future the textbook will have to compete more effectively for its audience. It seems essential that what we have learnt about the development of distance and open learning systems, improving the effectiveness of independent study materials and grappling with the problems of making computers accessible and 'user friendly' should be passed on rapidly to specialist authors and publishers so that they may write and publish with more success. If it is true that such personally oriented material is presently too high cost it is perhaps, even more important that conventional publications should seek to benefit from its special insights and thereby improve the way they communicate with their readership. The conventional text is, after all, in both temporal and volume terms currently the most important form of independent study material available to us.

Aims and values as barriers to progress

Conventional aims and values in education can sometimes operate against the attainment of our educational objectives. For example most of us would agree that literacy is the master key to the school curriculum and therefore also to certain kinds of reward in later life. In the light of this should we not, in developing literacy skills make concessions in terms of personal values? Some years ago I read several accounts of reading instruction in parts of the United States being let out to private enterprise. There were

understandably clear targets to be attained before the providers could reap their reward. Not being designed by teachers such schemes operated with a different system of values. The idea of providing gifts for reading improvement might horrify us but allegedly, portable television and transistor radios proved effective in producing radical improvements in reading level. Such improvements, ephemeral or not, indicate that developing reading, like most other human activities is very much a matter of will.

If we can, for one moment, set aside our 'value' barriers to communication it takes little imagination to suggest a variety of interesting ways of producing radical improvements in reading attainment. The male remedial reader in the secondary school for example is remedial only partly because he lacks the skill. Many would argue that above all he lacks the will. Our population is littered with people who can read but don't. Suspend temporarily your sensitivities about the exploitation of women, the F.R. Leavis notion of high culture and the Alan Garner cult of children's literature. Concentrate instead on the notion of will. It is a truism that adolescent boys are the victims of their bodies; they are on the sexual threshold and many are beyond it. 'Mayfair' is read under the desk. Just suppose we assembled an array of those 'doubtful' photographs and produced the 'Gillham - Mayfair Remedial Scheme' in which suitable salacious but 'controlled' textual material was written to accompany the illustrations.... Alas, it is impossible! And yet it is true that our presumptions and values about reading, language and educational development may help to defeat our best efforts.

Similar presumptions about our teaching force, at all levels, also mask the reasons for our failure to communicate the curriculum efficiently. Teachers and lecturers are all good readers and writers aren't they? Would this assumption be upheld by a critical reading of some of the inservice handout material given to teachers, or of many of the worksheets prepared for children, or even of the conference abstracts submitted by reading experts?

Rigour, obscurantism, fragmentation and unreality

Important matters like the poor pay off which we in education have had from educational research can be laid partly at the door of a literary and methodological obscurantism masquerading as rigour. Presumptions about what constitutes 'rigour' have encouraged the study of tiny fragments of the reading process which have few recognisable implications. Such researches are frequently preferred to studies with a necessarily lower level of 'rigour', in this sense, but which have profound professional implications. It is indeed unfortunate that reality cannot be controlled to fit the tidy investigation. A side effect of this dissociation of research from reality is that the tiny, fragmentary problem begins to assume a special virtue in the eyes of the researcher which appears to make it the key to the Universe. Consequently we are increasingly oppressed by a growing weight of indigestible, unintegrated and perhaps unintegratable research. The ghosts Paul Kammerer, the Lamarckian biologist, and Cyril Burt, the father of tripartitism, rattle their chains and remind us that ideas can become so strong that they bind minds, men and data.

The unreality described above is reflected in the nature of the reading curriculum which we offer our students. The poor match existing between school reading material and life outside school remains extreme. Frequently assumptions made by educators about the reasons for undertaking reading do not match the needs expressed by young people. If we get it into perspective reading is only one of a wide range of problem solving strategies open to us in pursuing our objectives (though it is admittedly a very powerful strategy indeed). Thus, reading may be but does not have to be pleasurable in itself. In the same way using a computer may be pleasurable in itself, but for many it is simply a means to an end. We have to recognise that reading will be used by different individuals in different ways perhaps to facilitate learning or to help the individual to survive in a complex literate world. If there is pleasure that is a bonus. Each reader has a right to independently

adjudge the situation and negotiate the way in which he will learn particular skills and for which purposes he will use them. The reading curriculum should be truly negotiable.

'Good' books and censorship

Our age has adulated the book and the cult of the book is a danger of which we must beware. Most of us received our early education in a world dominated by books and like us the modern adult constitutes a special kind of 'literate', schooled in rather dated notions of quality and aesthetics. We have a clear picture of the 'good' book, a powerful idea which allows some librarians to reject both Enid Blyton and the output of Mills and Boon. It is this idea which makes it possible for a teacher to reject fascinating ephemera like comics, travel brochures, and Trafford Warehouse Catalogues as reading materials in the curriculum. Apparently if there is to be pleasure then it must be on our terms, 'respectable', within the pale. Of course censorship of this kind is even more serious at the political level. But whether the censorship is in terms of'high culture' or political humbug it represents a profound misunderstanding of what literacy really means.

Returning to the wise sayings of our Junior Minister we arrive at censorship by 'common sense'. He recently claimed that certain paperbacks published by the Novosti Press Agency setting out the arguments for disarmament constituted a Trojan horse in schools. "These books", he said, "are sent weekly to schools all over this Country, ordered by the schools themselves, and placed in school libraries. I am informed that they are being used by some teachers in the classroom as teaching materials." (The Guardian 17.7.82). Whatever the distortions contained in these books (and I suspect that, in common with most of the books I have ever read, there are many) one could argue that, warts and all, they are good copy for the reading curriculum and for the truly literate critical reader. There are after all many from our own generation of readers who believe what the Daily Express or the Morning Star tells them. And yet such readers would score highly on most

of our current, unsophisticated measures of reading competence. Will we as reading teachers ever be content with a nation of such bland believers? It is essential that the reading curriculum contains value-laden and biased content if we are to educate people who are capable of maintaining a critical, accountable democracy. Another kind of censorship is that imposed on the reading curriculum by mechanistic approaches to reading development which emphasise language and content control rather than interest and meaning. We are all aware of the large number of books, often painfully thin, which we as adults would neither select nor peruse with any pleasure but which nevertheless form the reading experience of many young people. The reading curriculum is also censored in a variety of other ways to do with economics, personal status and confused conceptions of audience. Thus the 'ideal' book in publishers terms is one which is suitable for anyone between the ages of nine and ninety. It is also a book which is related strongly to the existing social structure, for example, the target group must not only be sizeable it must also be coherent and accessible through recognisable channels. Thus, it is probably impossible to publish a book on say 'The reading demands of Mathematics' for mathematics specialists. This is because mathematicians are mainly interested in mathematics and those who are also interested in language are unlikely to constitute a large enough market. Despite the fact that the need for the better communication of mathematics is desperate it is generally felt that this is the responsibility of mathematical educators (who know too little about language) rather than language specialists (who know too little about mathematics). The problem involved here is that the mathematics specialist frequently knows too much about mathematics to appreciate the level of incompetence which he is encountering; nor is he able to distinguish clearly between mathematical incompetence and the incompetence caused by poor comprehension of mathematical language. On the other hand the language specialist knows too much about language to gauge how much it is reasonable to say and at what level of complexity in order to communicate efficiently with the mathematics teacher.

The reading curriculum, which includes mathematics, must sadly remain mysterious if we fail to grasp the nature of the trap which we are in. The trap of being specialists who have lost sight of the overall aim of education and of the role of language in providing access to it.

So What of the Future?

The future is threatening to say the least. Some like Toffler have indicated that the future in education will be extremely challenging; it will be recurrent, open, distant and microelectronic; it will be unpredictable; it will sorely test our capacity for dealing with new ideas and for learning new skills and languages. It is difficult to take all this on board at one time. Thus there have been faltering rather than convincing forays into the new territory. For example, the Open University course Language in Use has developed and used computer assisted learning as part of the course. This has been a brave initiative which has both perplexed and rewarded the language students who have studied it. Yet the course team have not gone the whole way and perhaps it was unreasonable to expect them to do so. Thus, the computer component is not essential for the completion of the course, it is used mainly as a technical support and feels curiously unconvincing (like a game) and it is not analysed or considered as an example of language in use in itself. I do not think these comments should blind us to the fact that the country is well populated with language courses which pay no attention whatever to the computer or the growth of Information Technology. Yet these are developments with profound implications for language and reading. I speak from no virtuous ability having tried relatively unsuccessfully to enter these mysterious new fields myself.

The literacy of the future must provide both a way of preserving our humanity whilst at the same time allowing us to cope with the new demands. It must help to preserve us from the binary mind which is so readily apparent in the polarisation of issues in the popular press. There are not always two

possible answers to a problem. As Salman Rushdie in his Booker Prize winning novel 'Midnight's Children' observed when commenting on the game of snakes and ladders

> "...the game lacked one crucial dimension, that of ambiguity.....because it is also possible to slither down a ladder and climb to triumph on the venom of a snake"

The new literacy must keep our minds open and capable of making criticisms. In effect reading will become a kind of <u>argument</u> rather than a kind of <u>conversation</u>. I once heard Mary McCarthy speaking at an Honorary Degree Ceremony when she put forward the idea of the plastic credit card as a status marker which distinguished those who were 'OK' from those who were not. She saw it as a subtle device for political and social control. This observation contains a warning for us. Literacy at the mechanical level can be the means by which minds are controlled and filled with propaganda, illiteracy may be preferable to this kind of intellectual serfdom. Literacy <u>beyond</u> this mechanical level promises intellectual freedom and an opening of the mind which constitutes the heart of democracy. A reading curriculum which defeats the potential tyranny of the printed page is the aim towards which this book aspires.

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